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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YAOUNDE 000370

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/C AND INL/C DIANE KOHN, ROBERT LEVENTHAL AND  
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COMMERCE FOR ITA KAREN BURRESS

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TAGS: [KCOR](#) [PREL](#) [CVIS](#) [PINR](#) [CM](#)

SUBJECT: (C) CAMEROON: AMBASSADOR MEETS BIYA TO TALK 212F,  
GETS EARFUL

Classified By: Political Officer Tad Brown for Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Ambassador called on Cameroonian President Paul Biya on April 3 to signal the USG's continued commitment to applying aggressively U.S. laws against corruption, including a travel ban against a sitting member of Biya's cabinet. Although the Ambassador avoided specifics, Biya immediately divined that the subject of the determination was Minister Delegate for Defense Remy Ze Meka and, presumably referring to a cabinet shuffle, said the USG action would "force me to accelerate my plans." Biya was unhurried and spoke for almost an hour about politics, the security forces, and the impact of the economic crisis. Biya said ELECAM would be fully funded and the Senate and Constitutional Court established by December 2009, but gave no hint as to his plans for presidential elections slated for 2011. Biya was less focused and more rambling than in previous meetings and did not seem fully seized with the numerous pressing challenges his government faces. End summary.

Reminding Biya of the USG's  
Anti-Corruption Commitments  
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¶2. (C) Post requested a call for the Ambassador on Cameroonian President Paul Biya, specifying that the Ambassador would need only fifteen minutes and would prefer to dispense with the heavy press coverage that usually accompanies Biya's audiences. Ambassador reminded Biya of their previous conversations regarding USG anti-corruption policies, especially Presidential Proclamation 7750, which calls on the Department of State to refuse entry to corrupt officials and those who corrupt them. Without providing any specifics, Ambassador told Biya she wanted to inform him that Washington had recently found a current member of Biya's cabinet ineligible to travel to the U.S. and cautioned Biya that the USG's decision might make its way into the public domain.

The Likely Suspect  
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¶3. (C) Perhaps because so many previous conversations had focused on the corruption of Minister Delegate for Defense Remy Ze Meka, Biya immediately fixated on Ze Meka as the likely target, saying "I am not surprised. He is so bad." Biya professed bewilderment at Ze Meka's seemingly insatiable greed. "He stole so much while he was the Secretary General at the Prime Minister's office," Biya mused, "you would think he would have enough." Biya told the Ambassador that the USG's actions would "force me to accelerate my plans."

Problems in Defense and Security  
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¶4. (C) Biya wondered aloud who he might nominate to succeed Ze Meka, complaining that there was a shortage of trustworthy and competent candidates. Biya expressed a high level of confidence in current Minister for Justice/Vice Prime Minister Amadou Ali, who was Defense Minister in the late 1990s, and mused about nominating Ali to head Defense again. Biya said he was aware of the problems within the regular military, including growing frustrations over the increased responsibility and resources being given to the Rapid Intervention Brigades (BIR) that operate under Biya's direct command, independent of the regular military. Biya said his decision to give the BIR control over Bakassi Peninsula along Cameroon's coast had left Cameroon's northern hinterlands more vulnerable to banditry since the BIR's departure.

Biya "Grateful" for Support  
from "Our American Friends"  
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¶5. (C) Despite the Ambassador's stated desire to avoid taking too much of his time, Biya was unhurried and spoke at length about a broad range of topics. Biya asked the Ambassador to carry a message on her upcoming visit to Washington that Cameroon is committed to developing its democracy and "grateful" for the support it receives from its "American friends." Still glowing from the March visit of Pope Benedict, Biya said he hoped Cameroon's "next visitor" would be President Obama and waxed reminiscent of his own modest upbringing, which he seemed to believe likened him to Obama.

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Coming in 2009: ELECAM  
Funding and Senate  
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¶6. (C) Biya said he had recently instructed the Ministry of Finance to provide funding ("whatever they need") to ELECAM, the newly created elections commission. Sensing that Biya was unaware of the U.S. Embassy's publicly critical stance on ELECAM, the Ambassador recalled that the USG had reservations regarding the leadership of ELECAM, making it all the more important that ELECAM establish its credibility through early, effective action to ensure credible and successful elections. Biya said he intended to have the Senate and Constitutional Court up and running by the end of 2009 and wants to "have everything in place by the end of my mandate." Admitting he had not shared his plans with anyone else, Biya confided in the Ambassador that he intended to use his own discretion to nominate Senate members in order to move aging and corrupt generals out of the military, where they continued to block progress.

Power, AES and Rio Tinto  
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¶7. (C) Biya returned repeatedly to his concern about Cameroon's economy, especially the lack of progress on major investment projects and the potential fallout from the world economic crisis. Biya had met the previous day with a senior official from multinational mining giant Rio Tinto. Referring to the meeting and Rio Tinto's assurances that it will expand its aluminum production in Cameroon despite financial constraints, Biya said "I hope they will keep their promises because they promise, promise, promise." Biya said he was aware that Rio Tinto and American energy provider AES were locked in negotiations to fix an energy tariff for ALUCAM, the Rio Tinto-Government of Cameroon joint venture operating an aluminum smelter at Edea, but did not provide any vision for how the dispute would be resolved.

¶8. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's analysis that the AES-Rio Tinto negotiations would have an impact on Cameroon's power sector for the foreseeable future, Biya said he

believed electricity is "the most important thing" for an economy but offered no vision for the extent to which the GRC was willing to subsidize Rio Tinto's power needs either directly or through higher prices to Cameroonian consumers. Biya said he hoped work would begin soon on a new power plant slated to be built in Kribi by AES subsidiary Kribi Power Development Company (KPDC) and expressed frustrations that the project had already been delayed for more than a year. Biya said he hadn't realized that the project was hung up by the lack of an agreement between the Cameroonian National Oil Company (SNH) and Perenco, the private firm that would provide gas to the Kribi plant. Biya said he was "cross" to learn the deal hadn't been signed as he had ordered and told the Ambassador he would "call in" Laurent Esso, the Secretary General at the Presidency, and Adolphe Moudiki, the General Manager of SNH, to express his frustrations.

Comment: Is Biya in Full Command?

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¶9. (C) Biya was more tired and rambling than usual and did not seem to be getting fresh information about on-going events in Cameroon. He came across as better informed (through French TV) on POTUS' recent visit to Europe than on the pressing local issues of the day, including Cameroon's struggles to mitigate the loss of jobs and revenue already suffered as a result of the international economic crisis. Biya's account of his engagement in the SNH-Perenco gas contract is revealing: two of his closest and most powerful advisors failed to carry out his instructions or keep him appraised of the situation, causing more than a one-year delay in the badly needed development of the Kribi power plant; Biya showed no more than mild irritation and promised no remedial action.

¶10. (C) Biya also professed ignorance of First Lady Chantal Biya's pending trip to Los Angeles for the African First Ladies' Health Care Summit and the ongoing visit of a World Bank team working on recovery of stolen corrupt assets (supposedly one of his highest priorities). As he has with previous Ambassadors, Biya mused aloud about possible cabinet nominations and chatted unhurriedly, without apparent purpose or direction. As the Ambassador excused herself, Biya beseeched her: "Please call whenever you want to talk. Don't

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go through protocol, but call this office directly." Biya offered only limpid responses to the pressing issues of the day: senior officials who disobey or undercut his orders, the pending cabinet reshuffle, continued kleptocracy, the future of the energy sector, Cameroon's response to the economic crisis.

Despite the popular impression of Biya as an all-controlling strongman, we are increasingly struck by signs of Biya's laxism, his tenuous grasp of weighty and urgent issues and his seeming ignorance of, or indifference to, the activities, at times corrupt, incompetent and disloyal, of his own closest officials.

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